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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ'S TACTICAL RETREAT ON EDUCATION - FOR NOW

REF: A. 2007 CARACAS 001947

[1](#)B. 2007 CARACAS 000906

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Venezuelan government is promoting a highly politicized new school curriculum designed to create "new citizens" and a "new Republic" based on vague Bolivarian values. Teacher training efforts to implement the new pre-K-through-high school curriculum by September sparked teacher and parent protests over the last several weeks. In response, President Chavez announced April 4 that the BRV is prepared to slow implementation and put the new curriculum to a public referendum in 2009. He also challenged the opposition to create an alternative curriculum. The government has also had to pause efforts to eliminate internal admission exams at Venezuela's autonomous universities in the wake of civil society defiance. Government leaders believe education reform is key to moving their "Bolivarian" project forward, but the more they try to impose their vision, the more they prompt widespread, civil society resistance. End Summary.

BRV Rolls Out New Curriculum

[1](#)2. (SBU) Education Minister Adan Chavez, the president's brother, announced last year the BRV's intention to implement "without hurry or pause" a new Bolivarian curriculum in all Venezuelan schools (Ref A) by the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year. The Education Ministry started moving ahead last summer with obligatory teacher training workshops in public schools. Ministry curriculum promoters expanded their training to private and Catholic school teachers starting in February 2008. The Education Ministry requires teachers to attend the training sessions outside normal working hours without compensation. Teachers must attend the 300-hour sessions in order to be eligible to continue teaching.

[1](#)3. (C) Embassy has obtained copies of the four curriculum guides that BRV teacher trainers are using. The guides outline four "pillars" of a Bolivarian education: learning to create, learning to coexist and participate, learning to value, and learning to reflect. The curriculum guides are generally technical, with dozens of pages devoted to laundry lists of specific desired educational outcomes. However, the curriculum also redefines the education system as a

"political and socializing process" designed to foster the founding of a "new Republic" and the "transformation" of Venezuelans. The guides explicitly mark and laud the reorientation of the government since Chavez' first election in 1998. The BV has not yet released the next textbooks (one for each grade) that students will use.

¶4. (C) The politicized elements of the new BRV curriculum are most apparent at the secondary school level and in the social sciences. Although the new curriculum does not explicitly mention socialism or Marxism, secondary students are supposed to gain a full understanding of "collective property" and prepare for "liberating work" that promotes "endogenous development." They are also supposed to learn about the "Bolivarian revolution as a platform of a participatory, protagonist, democratic, and partnership process" as well as other "emancipation movements" in the world today. They are also required to learn about the organization of Venezuela's armed forces. Some NGOs assert that students will be expected to do rudimentary paramilitary training as well, although that's not explicit in the texts.

Civil Society Reacts

¶5. (SBU) Over the last several weeks, teachers, particularly private school teachers more confident of their job tenure than public school teachers, have openly protested the proposed changes to the curriculum. In a number of cases, concerned parents joined teachers in public demonstrations against the curriculum, attracting local media attention. Civil society organizations also issued strong criticism of the BRV's curriculum guides which serve as the basis for the teacher training workshops. Local media also scrutinized leaked copies of the curriculum guides, highlighting the politicized elements of the proposed new Bolivarian curriculum.

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¶6. (SBU) During an April 4 nationally televised cabinet meeting, President Chavez announced that the BRV is not in a hurry to implement the new curriculum and is prepared to entertain further public debate leading up to a public referendum in 2009. He challenged the opposition to present an alternative curriculum. NGOs critical of the curriculum tell us that the BRV continues to hold teacher training workshops in public schools, but have merely suspended the workshops in private schools. They believe Chavez announced the pause in implementation merely to take steam out of the growing opposition, but intends to proceed where and when he can.

¶7. (C) The Venezuelan Chamber of Private Education (CAVEP), representing over 250 private schools that do not receive any state subsidies, is pressing ahead with information seminars for concerned parents. CAVEP does not believe it's worth the effort to try to improve the government's proposal, but rather believes an entirely new proposal should be developed. The Association of Catholic Schools (AVEC), representing over 750 parochial schools which receive state subsidies, agreed in March to review the government's proposal, without necessarily endorsing it. They say rather ambiguously that they can only support a curriculum consistent with Venezuela's existing constitution. Leaders of the Arturo Uslar Pietri Foundation are trying to coordinate civil society efforts to present an alternative curriculum. They suggest that there could be a nation-wide teachers' strike in September if the BRV tries to impose the current curriculum.

University Admissions

¶8. (SBU) The most recent expression of the BRV's

long-standing desire to control Venezuela's university system involves government efforts to change the admission system for Venezuela's autonomous universities to make them more "inclusive." These initiatives have also run into considerable civil society resistance. The BRV announced earlier this year that it would eliminate the admission exams of autonomous universities and assume responsibility for placing high school graduates. Eleven universities, both public and private, openly defied the BRV, announcing that they would retain their internal admission exams.

¶9. (C) BRV officials subsequently opened discussion with university representatives, but no compromise has been reached. Central University Rector Victor Paris told Cultural Attache that the BRV perceives admission exams as "satanic and diabolical" and believes they need "an exorcism." Both sides of the debate point out that the vast majority of university students come from private schools. The BRV argues that this is evidence of "social exclusion," while critics of the BRV argue that this is evidence that the public school system is largely dysfunctional.

¶10. (SBU) The BRV has agreed that universities can place some students in the 2008-2009 school year via internal admission tests, but is seeking to boost the percentage of students the central government can place. According to local media, the BRV wants to change the ratio of local admissions to government admissions from 70/30 to 50/50. Those negotiations are ongoing. In the meantime, the Ministry of Higher Education has established a nation-wide electronic registration mechanism in effort to centralize the college registration process.

Comment

¶11. (C) The BRV is caught between Scylla and Charybdis on education reform. President Chavez blamed the referendum defeat of his proposed constitutional package on the lack of socialist "consciousness" of Venezuelan voters. The BRV has been actively promoting the trifecta of ideologically-charged public education campaigns, a government-controlled university admissions process, and a new Bolivarian curriculum as vital for moving Chavez' "Bolivarian revolution" forward. However, education remains a sensitive political issue for which many otherwise passive Venezuelans are willing to become active. Public backlash has forced Chavez to put these efforts on hold -- for now. Interestingly, it has been civil society groups - NGOs, parent organizations, and teacher unions, that have led this fight. Opposition parties are coming to this issue rather

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late in the game and are not being automatically welcomed by leading civil society opponents of the BRV.

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